

St. John's Episcopal Church
Jackson, Wyoming
Sermon for Easter Day ~ April 5, 2015
The Reverend Ronald D. Pogue

The liturgy we have been celebrating for the past three days and which culminates in this hour is the archetypal liturgy of the Church. All the rest of the Sunday services of the year are based upon this day and upon this faith that “Christ has been raised from the dead and lives to die no more...in Christ shall all be made alive.” What Sunday is to the week, Easter is to the year. This is why our catechism says it is the duty of all Christians to come together week by week for corporate worship – because we are Easter People.

Because it is Easter, houses of worship around the world are filled with people, with the sights and sounds and smells of great joy. Now, there are those of you who wouldn't be in church if it weren't Easter. In the words of the angel, “Don't be afraid!” I'm not going to scold you for that because if you had to pick one day to rejoice in what God has done in Christ, you couldn't have picked a more appropriate day than Easter. Because there wouldn't be any Christian faith and hope without the Resurrection. It was the Easter faith of the early Church that caused the gospel to be preached throughout the world. “In Christ shall all be made alive.” And it is the same Easter faith that is still the greatest offer any religion has for our world with its voices of pessimism, terrorism, and fear.

In a world where everything is transitory, where we lose our youth and looks and energy, where our children grow up too fast and leave us, where jobs are suddenly taken from us, where technology is constantly changing, leaving us breathless, we are assured of one unchanging reality: God's love is steadfast. In a world where fundamentalists terrorize people who are different from them with words, legislation, and bullets, where people who are overwhelmed by their struggles destroy others in the process of taking their own lives, where floods and fires and snowstorms cause destruction: God's love remains steadfast. In the words of the hymn, Easter is about the “death of death and hell's destruction.”

Easter People believe that. And that faith is the basis of our new life in Christ. What are the implications of that new life?

New life in Christ is a life transformed. We have a new identity, a new cause and reason for living. That identity and that reason for living is not determined by, nor dependent upon, this material world. This transformation puts us in touch with a spiritual reality that is absolutely reliable.

This transformation is frequently described in scripture as well as by those who experience it today as an experience of dying and rising again. Somehow, when we have an encounter with death the possibility of life is close at hand. Something has to die within us in order for new life to emerge. By faith we can see that the message that life is designed to be transformed is proclaimed throughout the universe. The caterpillar is transformed into a beautiful butterfly; matter is transformed into energy and energy into matter; a seed dies and is buried only to sprout forth into new life that produces countless other seeds.

When this transformation comes to us, we look at everything in a new way. The way we spend our time, our energy, our money, our relationships, our personal habits, and our moral pursuits, all come under close examination. This is because you know you are somebody new. Naturally, we want others to know but the main thing is to become secure in this new identity for ourselves, so that we can avoid the temptation too be sanctimonious and judgmental. The whole point of dying and rising with Christ, the purpose of the great saving transformation, is for each of us to become the person we were meant to be. Because of the resurrection, our lives are transformed. Changed. We are new creatures!

New life in Christ is also a life renewed. There may be someone who is saying, “My life was transformed once but the transformation didn’t last. I’ve fallen back into the same old life I lived before and I just can’t seem to break out.” Sure it happens. Most of us know that experience. The Apostle Paul knew it. Even he who had met the Risen Christ on the Damascus Road and proclaimed his gospel all the way to Rome confessed, “I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want I do.” Out of his own experience with a failure in his faith he offers that prescription to keep our minds fixed on the deeper, eternal realities so we will not be seduced or discouraged by what is transitory.

All of us are in the midst of human life. The great transformation in Christ does not lift us above it. That’s why it is so important to renew our faith daily in the risen Christ and reassure ourselves with the knowledge that “Because he lives, we too shall live” – really live. We have to learn to do it daily and not just on Easter because this resurrection faith has to get under our skin and work its way into every fiber of our being.

Studies in outstanding hospitals indicate that patients recover faster in rooms where they can see trees and grass and growing things. These sights impact the human psyche with messages of renewal and hope. And the psyche responds. We can renew ourselves and extend the transformation deeper and deeper into our being when we feed our souls on a steady diet of heavenly food. The community of faith exists to facilitate this process. Through it, God offers the means of grace as God offers it nowhere else.

Your life and mine can be renewed by focusing on the resurrection not just on Easter, but daily. We are baptized! We have died and been raised with Christ! New life comes to us daily as God’s gift, fresh every morning. Because of the resurrection, our lives are renewed.

Because this is true, we see that new life in Christ is a life empowered. Have you ever wanted to stay in bed because what you have to do every day is discouraging, boring, filled with conflict, unchallenging? Have you ever dreaded one more day of meaningless activity? I suspect we are all familiar with that feeling. It is painful. Sometimes, we’re completely paralyzed.

We can identify with the feelings of the disciples of Jesus the day after the crucifixion. It seemed that the best life the world had ever known had been snuffed out in a senseless act of vengeance. His message of love seemed empty and defeated. There was little cause to get up the day after the crucifixion and the day after that.

The task of the women who went to the tomb on that first Easter was a depressing one. When they saw the angel and the empty tomb and heard the news and saw the Risen Christ, the heaviness of their hearts was lifted and they felt a new power in their life.

Because of the resurrection, your life and mine can be empowered too. You see, it's not mainly what we do each day that energizes us. All those things change. What energizes and empowers us consistently is the voice of the Risen Christ calling our name and telling us we are alive in him.

That is why Jesus said before his ascension his followers would be empowered to do even greater works than he had done. And that was why Paul exclaimed, "We are more than conquerors through him who loved us." Christ's victory is ours too. Because of the resurrection, a transforming, renewing power has been unleashed and is available for daily living. The life we live is the life of Christ. We have something wonderful for which to get out of bed. Because of the resurrection, our lives are empowered.

And, new life in Christ is a life enthroned. The good news of the resurrection does not end with transformation, renewal, and power for this life. We look beyond this life. As we pray in the Great Thanksgiving at funerals, "For to your faithful people, O Lord, life is changed, not ended." Because of the resurrection of Christ, a hole has been punched in the darkness of death. Because of the resurrection, you and I have been given a glimpse of life beyond the grave. The resurrected life does not end but continues. Death is not a period but a comma. The life God has begun in us here is not completed here but beyond this realm of time and space.

Oh, we still get up in the morning and eat breakfast, go about our daily work, face whatever comes our way, and have our moments of trial. No one is likely to notice a halo over our heads. But from the moment of our Baptism you and I have been joined to Christ in an indissoluble communion. Yes, some are critical of the Church at this point and say that we are so heavenly minded that we are no earthly good. Yet we also know that there is a great danger in being so earthly minded that the influence of heaven on us here and now is minimal and we exist on only a fraction of the energy available to us.

When you and I are grasped by the Resurrection and its power and glory for our lives, we realize that the trinkets for which we strive so desperately "are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us."

Because of the Resurrection, our lives are transformed, renewed, empowered, and enthroned. We are no longer just any people. We are Easter People. And we shout, "Christ is risen! The Lord is risen indeed." Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.